



Advertisement

NEWS POLITICS OPINIONS BUSINESS LOCAL SPORTS ARTS & LIVING GOING OUT GUIDE JOBS CARS REAL ESTATE RENTALS CLASSIFIEDS

SEARCH:  go  washingtonpost.com Web : Results by  | Search Archives

washingtonpost.com > Politics > The Fed Page

## Museum Collections Shrink As Tribes Reclaim Artifacts

Problem of Caring for the Items Persists

By Robert Gutsche Jr.  
Special to The Washington Post  
Thursday, March 9, 2006

MILWAUKEE -- The halls of the United States' museums, like those inside the public history museum here, are filled with thousands -- if not millions -- of American Indian artifacts. But slowly, many of the country's tribes are working to reclaim them.

Pottery fragments, stones, human remains and religious items used in centuries-old ceremonies are increasingly finding their way back to tribal lands, mostly through federal legislation passed in 1990 that helps museums and tribes deal with what is on public display.

All told, museums have returned hundreds of thousands of items through the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

It is the path one Wisconsin tribe is planning to use after its leaders became concerned last year that the financially troubled Milwaukee Public Museum might sell ancient tribal artifacts to make money. Some tribal historical officers point to 2004, when Chicago's Field Museum raised about \$15 million to build exhibits by selling what some Indians and historians considered significant documents: dozens of George Catlin portraits of Native Americans and other paintings of the West.

The Milwaukee museum -- which is run as a private company, though its collections are owned by Milwaukee County -- is nearly \$30 million in debt. Although Wisconsin's Ho-Chunk tribe -- along with 10 other Indian nations -- met with the museum staff and were told there are no plans to sell items to cover the debt, the Ho-Chunk stepped up efforts to claim eight spiritual items that have been with the museum for decades.

"Much of the public isn't aware of what sits in the museums," said George Garvin, the Ho-Chunks' historical preservation officer. "And in the past century, many things have happened to the artifacts when they went into museums," including preservation work and repairs that might have caused unintended damaged and defiled religious artifacts.

Advertisement

Federally recognized tribes can claim human remains, sacred objects needed for ceremonies, or items that originated with the tribe and were lost over time. Tribes often find items that they want repatriated by searching a federal listing of collections that museums were



At the Milwaukee Public Museum, a portrayal of a Native American powwow features authentic clothing and artifacts, some of which could be repatriated if a tribe requests it under federal law. (By Robert Gutsche Jr.)

**TOOLBOX**

 Resize  Print

 E-mail

 **TRY EMAIL MARKETING FREE FOR 60 DAYS!**

**COMMENT** 

 Comments

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED

**WHO'S BLOGGING** powered by 

[» Links to this article](#)

Advertisement



### FEATURED ADVERTISER LINKS

- Lawsuit: HydroxyCut Liver, Cochlear Implants, Zicam, Yaz
- Erin Brockovich, Lawyer: Mesothelioma, Asbestos, Lung Cancer
- Get your credit score range from Equifax 100% Free.
- Call Around the World with Vonage for \$24.99/mo!
- Russia Now: In-Depth Coverage of Russia News, Business, and More.

Advertisement

required to create and provide to tribes through the 1990 law. Only museums that receive federal funding are bound by the law.

Garvin said that reclaiming items the tribe believes were stolen, lost or donated without its consent is a way of sending a message to the public: What you think is yours isn't.

The message is being received. At Yellowstone National Park, human remains are being returned to two Western tribes. And at the University of

Kansas at Lawrence, officials said they will return some of their 5,000 Indian artifacts to a tribe after students complained the university had neglected them, though many more artifacts will remain at the school.

"If you compare now with 15 years ago, every museum knows what NAGPRA is and what tribes are connected with their collection. That wasn't the case then," said Tim McKeown, a program officer for the repatriation act. "Now more museums and tribes are aware of what's out there."

Before any tribe can receive artifacts, it must make the case that the museum does not have right of possession, sometimes by using oral history and tribal songs as proof of where the items belong.

For tribes, repatriation can resolve ownership and other issues related to the items, but sometimes tribes find it difficult to care for the ancient artifacts, many of which require repairs and a constant temperature to remain intact.

"What do you do with them once they are back with the tribe?" asked the Ho-Chunks' Garvin, who suggested sometimes the best place for certain items is a museum. "You wrestle with the idea: How do you get them back and how do you take care of them?"

For museums, repatriating items can mean emptying exhibits and a loss to the collection, although most museums are happy to work with the tribes, museum and federal officials said.

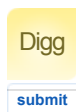
On the Milwaukee museum's second floor, a large exhibit case stands empty, a black film covering its glass. Dozens of other exhibits shine in the dim light around it.

About a year ago, an Iroquois tribe requested several dozen false face masks be removed from display because of their religious significance, said Alex Barker, one of the museum's top curators. The museum has not filled the vacancy.

And while the tribe has not requested the material be repatriated, the incident shows the influence tribes have over what is and is not in a museum. It also signals that potentially anything native could be removed from almost any U.S. museum if tribes can prove ownership.

Since 1990, for instance, the Milwaukee museum has fulfilled nearly 20 requests for items to be returned, including sacred objects and human remains.

"Ultimately, whether something is repatriated is not a decision we can make," Barker said. "I think it's unlikely that all the items in a museum would be repatriated, but it's dangerous for a museum to go in and say, 'None of these things are subject for repatriation.'"



More ways to share this Article...



Understand more about:

**News**

washingtonpost.com The web

**Talk about travel: Travel staffers help you plan**  
We want to use them during the holiday season. Will the airlines do...  
December 14, 2009 | washingtonpost.com

**Post Magazine: Letters of the Washington Red**  
...the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block...  
August 3, 2009 | washingtonpost.com

**Arizona Golf, With Reservations**  
...Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort and Spa. I'm slowly recovering from...  
November 30, 2003 | www.washingtonpost.com

**District Community Events Nov. 16-23, 2006**  
**OSCAR WILDE LECTURE**, University of Maryland professor William...

More about:  
[Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act](#)  
[Milwaukee](#) | [Wisconsin](#)

powered by evri

From Our Partners



Was Jesus a Common Name in the Year 1 B.C.?

The CBO's Rosy Health Care Budget Projections Are Pure Fantasy

What's the Best Movie of the Decade?

Slate Crunches the Numbers.

- Why Is Tinsel the Most Disdained Christmas Decoration?
- Troy Patterson: The 26 Best Cultural Moments of the Decade
- How To Make a Christmas Movie Even Schmaltzier: Add a Dog
- What if Mary Wasn't a Virgin?
- What the Heck Is a Snood and Do You Need One?

People who read this also read...

- Iran bans memorials for cleric in wake of violence
- Daylong Va. post office standoff ends peacefully
- - Miss Manners: 'Happy Holidays,' a proper general greeting
- Ask Amy



Most Viewed Politics Articles

- Senate approves landmark health-care bill
- Senate and House now must find magic pill
- Senate and House now must find magic pill
- Obama defends first-year record

- » [Top 35 Politics Articles](#)
- » [Most Popular on washingtonpost.com](#)

**Sponsored Links**

**Mom Reveals \$119/Hr Job! (NEWS ALERT)**

Read This Shocking Report Revealing All! Requirements: Can You Type?  
la-sentinel.com

**SECRET: White Teeth Trick**

Dentists DO NOT want you to know about THIS teeth whitening secret!  
www.theconsumerweekly.com

**30%-50% Return w/ Silver!**

Control \$25k Silver w/ a \$10k Investment! IRA-Eligible. \$10k minimum.  
DirectMetalsInvesting.com

[Buy a link here](#)

Advertisement

[NEWS](#) | [POLITICS](#) | [OPINIONS](#) | [BUSINESS](#) | [LOCAL](#) | [SPORTS](#) | [ARTS & LIVING](#) | [GOING OUT GUIDE](#) | [JOBS](#) | [CARS](#) | [REAL ESTATE](#) | [RENTALS](#) | [CLASSIFIEDS](#)

SEARCH:



washingtonpost.com



Web: Results by Google™

[Search Archives](#)

washingtonpost.com: [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Search Terms](#) | [Topics Index](#) | [Make Us Your Home Page](#) | [Newsletters](#) | [Mobile](#) | [RSS](#) | [Widgets](#)  
The Washington Post: [Subscribe](#) | [Home Delivery Service](#) | [Advertisers](#) | [PostPoints](#) | [e-Replica](#) | [Online Photo Store](#) | [The Washington Post Store](#) | [About The Post](#)  
The Washington Post Company: [Information and Other Post Co. Websites](#)

© Copyright 1996-2009 The Washington Post Company | [User Agreement and Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights and Permissions](#)

[Help](#) | [Contact Us](#)